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TIME ESSAY

## BAY OF PIGS REVISITED: Lessons from a Failure

LATE in 1962, White House Aide Theodore C. Sorensen relayed to President John Kennedy a request that a "distinguished author" be allowed to see the files on the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion that had ended in disaster about a year and a half before. Kennedy refused. "This isn't the time," he told Sorensen. "Besides, we want to tell that story ourselves."

Now, apparently, is the time—and two members of Kennedy's White House staff are telling the story themselves. One is Ted Sorensen, whose account forms the first installment in *Look* magazine's serialization of his forthcoming book about Kennedy. The other is Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., whose own book is being serialized by LIFE. Their recollections will certainly not be the last; but jointly, and with remarkably few contradictions between them, they do provide the most detailed account to date. What emerges is not only the story of an appalling failure—a failure of preparation, of command and, in the end, of nerve. At a time when U.S. intervention abroad is again a major issue, the story also becomes a classic example of how not to go about the business of intervening.

## A Terrible Idea

Sorensen, who was Kennedy's top staff technician both in the Senate and the White House, notes that his account is "limited by the fact that I knew nothing whatever of the operation until after it was over," although subsequently Kennedy poured his heart out to him. Schlesinger, who had left Harvard to become a presidential adviser, says that he considered the whole Bay of Pigs plan to be a "terrible idea" while it was under discussion, and had so told the President in memos and in private conversation.

Both memoirists assign to Kennedy what Sorensen calls "many and serious mistakes." Both admire Kennedy's insistence on bearing the public blame for the fiasco. Sorensen recalls how Kennedy told a news conference the obvious fact that he was "the responsible officer of government," after remarking ruefully: "Victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan." Yet Sorensen also remembers how, while walking in the White House garden the same day, Kennedy "told me, at times in caustic tones, of some of the other fathers of defeat who had let him down." The "fathers" were the new President's top-level advisers, particularly in the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency, most of them Eisenhower Administration holdovers. By the Sorensen-Schlesinger account, these advisers misadvised, misled and misinformed Kennedy. They are even charged with having overawed him. Schlesinger speaks of the "massed and caparisoned authority of his senior officials" and quotes Kennedy as saying after the event: "You always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."

In their defense of Kennedy, Sorensen and Schlesinger may have inadvertently done him a disservice—by suggesting how easily he allowed himself to be misled. More important, they call into question the basic decision-making process of American government. For Schlesinger insists that Kennedy was a prisoner of events, surrounded by "a collection of officials prepared to sacrifice the world's growing faith in the new American President in order to defend interests and pursue objectives of their own." And according to Sorensen, the whole Bay of Pigs project "seemed to move mysteriously and inexorably toward execution without either the President's being able to obtain a firm grip on it or reverse it." Still, whatever weaknesses there may have been—or may remain—in government decision-making, there seems nothing wrong with the apparatus that firm leadership at the top cannot cure. The trouble at the time, both chroniclers agree, was not the apparatus but the men who used it.

office only twelve weeks and, writes Sorensen: "He did not fully know the strengths and weaknesses of his various advisers. He had not yet geared the decision-making process to fulfill his own needs, to isolate the points of no return."

Schlesinger and Sorensen stress the fact that early in 1960 President Eisenhower gave a go-ahead to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to train, supply and support anti-Castro Cuban exiles in Guatemala. It went without saying that those exiles would eventually strike at Cuba and try to overthrow Castro. Ike crossed no i's and dotted no i's as to the specifics of the plan. In Sorensen's words, Kennedy "inherited the plan, the planners and, most troubling of all, the Cuban exile brigade—an armed force, flying another flag, highly trained in secret Guatemalan bases, eager for one mission only."

Sorensen reports that Kennedy, "when briefed on the operation by the CIA as President-elect in Palm Beach, had been astonished at its magnitude and daring. He told me later on that he had grave doubts from that moment on." Schlesinger also reports that Kennedy was deeply dubious of the whole idea. But at one of the formal meetings that Kennedy held on the subject after he became President, he was persuaded by the plan's advocates that "the simplest thing, after all, might be to let the Cubans [meaning the exiles] go where they yearned to go—to Cuba." He also was not unmindful of what benefits a successful invasion could bring, and in early April all the hot inside talk in Washington was that "the Kennedys would knock off Castro soon."

## Trying to Keep It Quiet

Perhaps the most persuasive of the invasion advocates was CIA Director Allen Dulles, who, according to Sorensen, reminded Kennedy of the success of the CIA-sponsored overthrow of a pro-Communist Guatemalan government in 1954. Said Allen Dulles to Kennedy: "I stood right here at Ike's desk and told him I was certain our Guatemalan operation would succeed. And, Mr. President, the prospects for this [Cuba] plan are even better than they were for that one." There was a strong suggestion that Kennedy could not afford to back away from a long-prepared anti-Castro project and appear to be soft on Communism—softer than the Republicans had been. If the Cuban exile brigade were disbanded, it was argued, they would fan out all over Latin America, and explain how the U.S. "had lost its nerve" in the fight against Communism. "Having created the brigade as an option," says Schlesinger, "the CIA now presented its use against Cuba as a necessity." Later, Kennedy told Schlesinger: "I probably made a mistake in keeping Allen Dulles on. It's not that Dulles is not a man of great ability. He is. But I have never worked with him and therefore I can't estimate his meaning when he tells me things . . . Dulles is a legendary figure, and it's hard to operate with legendary figures." Kennedy also said: "I made a mistake in putting Bobby into the Department of Justice. He is wasted there . . . Bobby should be in CIA."

In any event, when the time came, Kennedy approved the proposed invasion. According to Schlesinger, the President strictly stipulated that "the plans be drawn on the basis of no U.S. military intervention." Sorensen recalls that stipulation with slight but highly significant differences. Kennedy, he said, insisted that there be no "direct, overt" participation of "American armed forces in Cuba."

Overt was the key word. Sorensen says that what Kennedy wanted—and was misled into thinking he would get—was a "quiet, even though large-scale, infiltration of 1,400 Cuban exiles back into their homeland"; an air strike or so would have been the "only really noisy enterprise."

Things quiet, Kennedy vetoed

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